



12-2019

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.07>

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### Recommended Citation


Tutar, Laçın (2019) "Street Affects: An Exercise on Why We Listen To But Don't Hear the Street Music," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 28 , Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.07>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol28/iss1/11>

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# Street Affects: An Exercise on Why We Listen To But Don't Hear the Street Music<sup>1</sup>

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This paper argues that affective moments between street musicians and the audience in Istanbul, Turkey suggest a loose connection to open and highly affective practices of hearing. The street brings them together during the moments of performance. The performance twists the power of sound that the musician makes and draws that into visualization of the moment, which underlines a peculiar affective attachment on the audience's side. The city's, musician's, and the listening practices' significance in these moments are taken into account and narrated with examples from the fieldwork.

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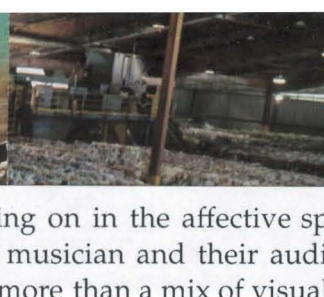
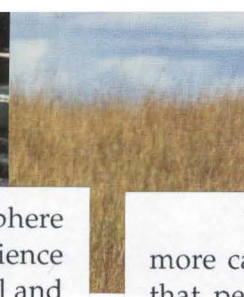
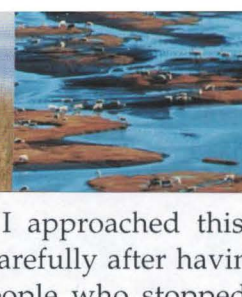
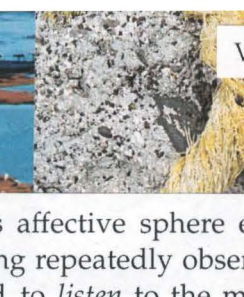

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Prof. Anna Secor for her comments on an early draft of this paper.

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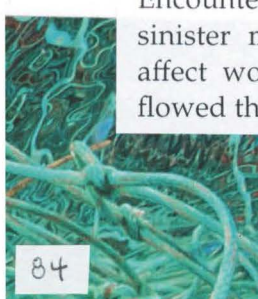
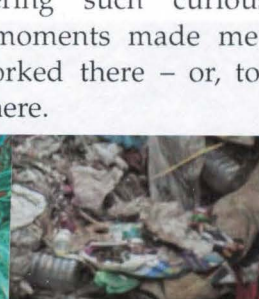
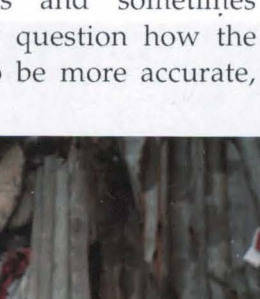
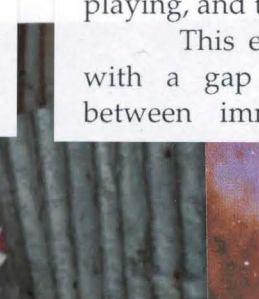
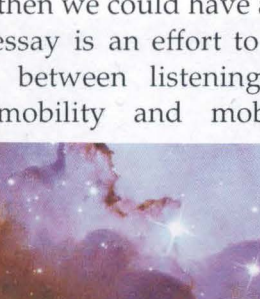
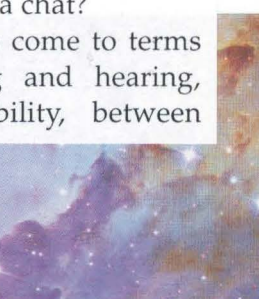








What is going on in the affective sphere between the street musician and their audience on the street? It is more than a mix of visual and aural sensations of bodies in transit, bodies that are either working in, passing by or touring the place, and that are lured by an immediate, short-lived yet repetitive, sometimes makeshift musical performance. Reasons to perform on the street vary from managing precarity to making a public statement of an alternate politics of music and life, even to building confidence out of difference. But street performers' motives are beyond this short essay's focus. Here, I problematize the audience's obsession with visualization in their fleeting affective encounters with street music(ians) in Istanbul, Turkey. My role there as a researcher was to take account of moments of performance and record events, encounters, ruptures and flows surrounding those moments in Istanbul's street music scene between 2014 to 2016.

One immediate note was that so many photos, videos and notes got posted on social media – not always with geotagging – of a performance that was found endearing or interesting or touching or just weird. From time to time, when interaction with musicians took place, it was with its twists and surprises: for example, think of the peculiar rhythm of when someone in the audience was getting too close to the performer without permission in order to take a picture without even having a word with them, treating the stage as dead as a sculpture. Or, when communication is much more relaxed between the band and a small group of onlookers who cheered to songs, danced, clapped and hung out with the performers: it turns out part of the audience knew some of the musicians, and so they shared an even ground – sometimes they are among friends. Both of these situations hinted at a temporary – yet strong – bond at the same level, but they contrasted in the sense that each flowed from an uneven end and met here on the shared street stage. Encountering such curious and sometimes sinister moments made me question how the affect worked there – or, to be more accurate, flowed there.

I approached this affective sphere even more carefully after having repeatedly observed that people who stopped to *listen* to the music took selfies at the scene and photos of the scene like in an enchanted *reflex*. I found it perplexing how space that was so open to influences from all over the place allowed *listening*, yet skipped *hearing*. Perhaps the need to make it visual comes up naturally by being there; then, does witnessing the auditory dimension command visual documentation? It seemed to me that international and local tourists alike strived to prove they're listening – was it a kind of duty? Was that act required to verify an abstract purchase (in an economy of experience), and functioned like a certificate of the fact that they had been affected by what they found there on the spot? Perhaps an act of appreciation is not quite distanced from an act of capturing the practice on camera? After all, I occasionally recorded these stages too, for my own purpose of documenting what happened there, even if my rhythm was different: I did not listen and hit the share button hastily to move on quickly with my route afterwards. Besides, the musician-body shares a similar obsession with the touring-body, that is to say, the want of visibility. When on the feeble, makeshift yet seamless stage that is built out of the street, band members habitually ask people to "take and share photos of their performance on Facebook" if they "like [the band] on Facebook." That would do them good. The online presence will presumably affirm and expand their struggle, a proto-business that is more in the form of a pursuit of art and life (or the other way around?). Does being visible equal appreciation and promotion? Does it secure that the musicians and the context of their song are being heard all right? Perhaps it is for the sake of being visible. What did it mean when the musician I ran into and asked for an interview repeatedly pointed me to visit their online presence so that I would send them a message online to check when they are downtown, playing, and then we could have a chat?

This essay is an effort to come to terms with a gap between listening and hearing, between immobility and mobility, between



"sonorization of images" that Virilio (2003) criticized, and getting immersed in soundscapes, a practice sound studies have spoken so fondly of (Schafer 1993, among many others). This is a gap full of affective bonds. What is the matter with affect when we recognize and problematize a rift between listening and hearing? Murray Schafer (1993), a pioneer of listening to one's environment actively, defended an active, almost biophilic listening: he went against the grain and suggested that dominant soundscapes of the urban and the industrial silenced the richness of life around us. It takes effort and patience to actively listen to one's environment, to its less visible components, thanks to an aggressive urbanization. However, for the audience in my case, listening in the city center remains a rather superficial act; if they listened to the sounds and music à la Schafer, they would not necessarily like what they heard; it would be too long, too detailed, and even noisy. That is why I present a twist between listening and hearing in this essay: hearing patiently where the music comes from and goes to is serious work that an audience member, who pauses to photograph street music, would not easily be willing to undertake. The passing audience member allows themselves to get affected by the sound and space in a peculiar way. Hearing sound and space would mean to let go of a touristic control in a sense; yet, people in the audience are selective when they take a selfie or choose to pause to listen to a certain sight for a while. It is not about patience, it is not about opening up and defending the sounds of an environment beneath an aggressive urban context. What touristic hearing does is socially reproductive. I pick up on this behavioral nuance thanks to their haste, their short span of attention, and, when they, as touring-bodies, do not engage in conversation out of curiosity about the musicians. On an interesting note, Marie Thompson (2017), who returns to Michel Serres' work on parasitism in order to write about the materiality of affect, suggests that noise is heard as a "generative force" (60): we do not listen to noise, we hear it; and in hearing its parasitic context, we find new information, new ground.

Noise is "an affective, perturbing force" (ibid., 60), and it becomes sound that allows a substantial communication between ends. When we hear stuff, we open; we are at a receiving end without having to be instrumental about taking something from the milieu for profit. We allow interruption; we are situated in a milieu that brings to us surprises along with what we receive. Thompson's argument confronts the average ears that the heard parasitic components can highlight relation and communication, and I realize the hearing component can be equally significant in thinking about street musicians' performance. However, when the passing audience member listens to the musicians for consuming a certain message inscribed on the façade, the force of their songs and sounds becomes attenuated. In this essay, I want to take up the exercise of thinking about the audience's rhythms as they pause for the musicians who performed.


### *The City*

In *Politics of Affect*, in a conversation with Joel McKim on Micropolitics, Massumi (2015, 59) talks about an "enacted past" running "active in the present." Regarding affective memory, Massumi argued that

there is no such thing as starting from scratch. Everything re-begins, in a very crowded, overpopulated world. Even one body alone is prepopulated – by instincts, by inclinations, by teeming feelings and masses of memories, conscious and nonconscious, with all manner of shadings in between (2015, 51).

Massumi reminds the reader that perceiving shock is elemental in understanding the workings of circulating affect. If the question is when and how a politics of something is born, then the *thought* of something is equally significant as the action in constituting the present, while that thought runs in the mass beyond its consciousness. When taking a selfie of a moment of musical performance found,






listened to, and lost in the street is an affective act, the act begs to take us beyond the façade, i.e. the listening façade. I think that is how an “enacted past” will be observed “running active in the present.” What brought the musician to that spot, and what brought the touring-body and the touring-ears there have a lot of personal reasons, of course; however, there are collective reasons to their encounter, too. There is a past that is not heard in such an act, and affect is one way how association can be formed between one body and the mass. Here, we are dealing with “microshocks” and their impact on us as “micropereceptions”; and the latter is graspable as “something that is felt without registering consciously” (ibid., 53), with reference to Deleuze and Guattari. I recognize that the power of micropereceptions speaks much to how the touring, listening, watching or musical body in the street swims in the material and immaterial currents of the street. So, such an active memory is alive in particular nodes and corners of a city, too; and yet, it sleepwalks as long as it circulates.

In this sense, Istanbul’s main public corridor, *Istiklal Street*, a touristic catch and a pedestrian street that opens up to Taksim Square next to a tiny public park with a much contested history that extends well beyond the local area, carries such nonlinear vibes to the present. Following a tide of youthful political protest in the Summer 2013 in Istanbul, the authoritarian response to it showed that the past is alive in the commercial and urban governmental ambitions to reshape the milieu of this square (see Dikeç 2013; Hammond 2013; Hammond and Angell 2013; among others, who noted that these ambitions very much circulated in the space). Then came 2014 and 2015, an intense period of elections and strife in the country. The protests had coincided with the fervent Arab Spring, and would touch Istanbul’s already troubled mood; the latter, in the mood for elections, brought more of those complicated feelings about difference. According to Genç (2016), the protests had incited a local generation of young artists’ greater attention to the Taksim area, where tensions over an imperial reconfiguration of the site met with future-oriented concerns

over what to make of this space. Yörük (2013; 2014) discussed how the liberating air from summer 2013 stirred a mobilized Kurdish politics in the country along with giving more space to other political discussions over rights and wrongs of religion, morality, sexuality, economy and so on. In my own field notes, I was able to record more relaxed and energized Kurdish voices next to Black Sea sounds and dances, joining musically to the space next to Turkish and Farsi songs, Balkan and klezmer tunes, or more exotic performances of, say, Korean dancers or vuvuzela performers, alongside the dances of the pride parades and political demonstrations. It was not surprising to have those all together; after all, this space was a massive tourist attraction.

Meanwhile, businesses on the street noticed and responded to the flow of Arab tourists (see for instance, Tremblay’s news report on it, 2016) along with a slow yet persistent inflow of refugees from Syria. Economic stress was also becoming a part of everyday, as business took off and shops closed. Now, new actors joined the rhythm of the place in their own ways; one, for displacement and escaping the conflict; the other, fulfilling the duties of a touring-citizen. What is more, added to this picture was the 2014-2015 election frenzy in the country, which actually ended up creating a sense of mess, and pushing much of local youth away from this axis of the city. It was no longer fun, safe or interesting to be there in a cacophony. One day, one of my research participants would take me to an artists’ café where many Middle Eastern (not necessarily Arab) musicians and youth were regulars; the next day, I would walk the *Istiklal* to hear a woman’s random cry as she begged in Arabic in the middle of the pavement, next to the tram route. The male tourist who flew into the city from a country south of Turkey to get a “hair transplant” and took the family along for a vacation would perhaps understand the language, but did one need to know that language to “hear” the anguish and burden in her voice? Mind you, what is caricatured in the above character became a popular – i.e. selective





– image of a typical new tourist in the country since 2015 – and the image finds embodiment toward the right end in Photo 1 below, too, as he held out the selfie stick closely and ambitiously to capture the performance. One day I would find my way to a concert by a musician from Syria living in Istanbul, organized in the context of a festival to acknowledge her culture; another day, I would stand in the crowd and listen to a street concert, next to the typical new tourist holding a selfie stick attached to his phone camera, and usually surrounded by family on the trip. However, he was not the only figure who embraced the sounds with his camera as he toured; in that sense, many others in the audience repeated the act of “sonorization of images and all audio-visual icons,” if I may build on Virilio’s (2003, 69) phrase on the workings of global multimedia on works of art.

### *The Musician*

I was curious if the musicians I talked to *really* liked this place, this mess, this flow and the rich attention it brought about. The city has showed up as a hub in global music production with world music tunes in the recent decades (Değirmenci 2010; 2013); and, even before the 2000s, Istiklal Street was marked by sounds and sights of the musician as a transnational figure seeking new platforms: as early as 1990, Sun Ra had visited the city and played live on a truck touring Istiklal Street; his concert was apparently organized and video recorded by a music organization company in Istanbul still active in the sector (Kortun 2013). The jazz and experimental tunes of Sun Ra had met the street as a stage. When I learned about this visit in 2016, after accidentally seeing a picture of it on the wall of a concert venue, I mainly thought about two things. First, this performance had already marked *Istiklal Street* as a stage, and regardless of whether musicians I talked to knew about this or not, it did not matter: it was already born as a stage, and it was constantly being (re)born as new bands, amateur and schooled musicians stopped by at its collective stage. If it did happen in the 1990s, in the wake

of a stressful period of internal displacement and migration in the country, it was no surprise that it would happen now; the word would spread and it would attract more, alternative musical visits. While I am not making any inferences that this truck concert was what started it all, the fact that a concert organization company got involved in recording a performance that changed a lot in the soundscape of this street was striking enough. Second, I thought of whether and how musicians ignored the audience circulating and flowing before their eyes, as I recalled listening to funky jazz tunes from an orchestra on a tram going back and forth on the street, which was part of a day of festivities organized by the local government. Sun Ra’s orchestra had toured the same route; the resemblance was no surprise, given that this was *the* touristic corridor of the city. The transiency of the relationship between the performer and the audience was shocking, though.

Taking note of a disconnect between street performers and audience, I am taken aback by how one of my early conversations with a street musician nailed it. Playing guitar and timbrel on his own on a night in October in the Galata area, near *Istiklal*, he told me that he was a travelling musician, originally from Greece. I had to stand on the sidewalk near him for a long bit before I was able to strike up the conversation. When he took a break from playing, I introduced myself. “You’re not a musician, if you were, you wouldn’t find it interesting. You would be like let’s play, let’s go,” he situated me. “For a musician, it is [a] feeling; let’s do it, let’s play, come on [sort of feeling],” he added. It was noisy because the street was not closed to car traffic. In the really narrow street (see Photo 2), few people stopped to pay attention to the performance. At one time, I noticed that laborers across the street working on the construction of a store paid attention to him without coming closer. I asked him what he thought of people who “stopped and listened”: “I visit [during] September-October-November every year. Doing this for four years, it is different than the last year. Last year, people





**Photo 1.** Musicians performing in front of locals, tourists, street children. Ortakoy, Istanbul; August-September 2015. Photo by the author.



**Photo 2.** Playing to a narrow street near Galata, October 2014. Photo by the author.



were making music with me, joining. This year, it is silent. They just go by. [...] Money is not important, sometimes they like your 'figure' so they give [you] money. I play in bars too. This is different [though], I want [random] people to join." He clearly desired the audience to participate; that came up again when I asked him to tell me more on what instruments meant to him: he explained that he used the timbrel to clue the audience into the rhythm and to help them join in.

Other musicians may give different accounts of interactive music-making. A Turkish performer published his diaries chronicling the period when he made music in the street; he played Persian *santur* (dulcimer), which required him to avoid looking up or across to the audience. Anar (2018) mentioned being able to only look at people's shoes in front of him and not their faces as he played. This allowed him to avoid the audience in a sense, to play uninterrupted — unless by other means. It did not make a connection between musicians and performers impossible of course; perhaps, it simply hints at how the instrument imposes on genre, genre imposes on posture, posture imposes on the connection to the street. If someone in the audience wanted to get into a conversation with him, this would not stop the person. On the B-side of the narration, he tells of a time when someone who already worked elsewhere, say, in a public office, played with them on the street. This temporary band member wore sunglasses to go unrecognized, and simply did not feel like taking a share from the money donated by the audience (Anar 2018, 172). In my notes and conversations, I recall instances of when someone in the audience could leave some money and take the change they wanted by picking coins from musician's instrument case/donation box. Taking a picture or a video of such a public performance seems not to require permission. Taking a selfie with the musician during an ongoing performance is another story, though. Having witnessed such moments on *Istiklal Street*, as a random young woman jumped on the stage, got behind the performers as they played, asked her friend to


take her picture with the band, not asking permission before or after, I asked the musician how they felt: "Just rude, but can you do anything?" was a common answer. I would get the feeling the musician wanted to disregard that instance. It is not like the listening-body changes their rhythm according to that of musician's; instead, it seems like they are interfering without being interfered with. How is that an affective moment? The flow of interaction in such an affective sphere reminds me of Kathleen Stewart's talk of "being in the mainstream" (2007, 51): being in tune without getting involved deeply in the tune (because that would alter you irreversibly).

Unlike those who casually shoot a picture and keep going, children are welcome and not an interruption to performers. Many times, street musicians add that it is nice to get a response from children. It feels different. Bodily commotion, voice and informal interaction from kids dancing to their tunes, talking to the instruments and getting excited on the stage are all part of a child's affective involvement in the scene. This is not the same as the tourist who is hastily going for their camera and shooting with it. Above, in Photo 1 from *Ortakoy*, Istanbul, you can see working kids getting up close to the performers, placing chaplets on their heads and just hanging out around them. They are not street kids, but they are a regular part of the scene: working kids, who are supposedly sent there to sell those chaplets to the touristic crowd in this busy part of the city. They associated with the affective sphere as sharecroppers, not customers.

### *Listening versus Hearing*

I'd like to end the essay with positioning touristic listening, which remains brief, on the go and on the surface, as opposed to situated hearing, which comes up to the façade in a constant struggle with tensions of the city and the place itself, and plays with an affective memory while surviving the place. The makeshift stage of the street is perfectly integrated in the economy of the city that relies





on tourist inflow, which is indispensable for the municipality to make a profit, in the face of inherited tensions and practices from the past(s). To be fair, the street musician is also aware of the stage; otherwise they would not consider being there while their performance runs on selfies, donations and love/attention coming from passers-by (stoppers-by). These are fundamental to their presence and performance. They are creating a performance to be watched as much as listened to in the street. They want to be seen, and they might honestly want to be seen for the sake of making a statement alongside the rhythm of capital on the street. Speaking of the street and its rhythms, Pasi Falk (1997, 181) conceived of the dynamic street as a platform for "serial looking," where touching is usually out of question. It should not be too intense to stop the flow.


However, the kind of street I documented is quite tactile. There is a change in the rhythm of the place at the moment a performance hopes to turn strangers to (kind of) neighbors and sway them from "serial looking" into deliberate conversation. The musician welcomes this touch, too, even though it may fall short of a situated hearing. Meanwhile, the literature on encounter (Valentine 2008; 2013; Wilson 2017, among others), finds that "face-to-face encounter" can acknowledge tension and conflict. Being immersed in one's craft/art in the street is not a solitary act; the musician cannot escape the mess. Being on the street is a tool for "meeting between adversaries or opposing forces and thus a meeting 'in conflict' " stated Helen Wilson (2017). Based on that, we can state that we enter a strife with prejudice and "micro-publics" in the moment of encounter, according to Gill Valentine, utilizing Ash Amin's work. There are obvious gaps during an encounter; it is just that the encounter means a will to be open to be affected by that, too.

A gap between listening to the music and hearing the sound of it becomes relevant to understanding encounter in the street, as the tourist-body acts like immersed in the musical performance until the excitement of a selfie


wears out. Sound studies scholars tell the difference of careful, active listening from just being exposed to sounds, and describe the former closer to what I take as *situated hearing* in this essay. Recalling Schafer, in his piece titled *Open Ears*, he simplified the gap to be between the developed, industrial world and the rest: "Sound objects in the oriental landscape encourage peripheral listening, while sounds in the West compete for focused attention – can this be true?" he asked (Schafer 2003, 18). In my understanding, hearing as an act is less than controllable; it is not a rationalized effort, whereas this fits into the frame of "deep listening" discussed by acoustic ecologists such as Schafer. In my case, the act of hearing is also more complicated than a situated contrast between the industrial urban and the rest in the countryside landscape. My motivation to distinguish listening from hearing so comes from bell hooks. In her autobiographical book, *Wounds of Passion*, there is a passage where she reminisces about her university experience in California, her encounters with class and ethnic differences. This passage might indicate a failure of hopeful encounter, but it also hints at how people can avoid being affected much by their surroundings, avoid hearing (the difference) when they are too busy affirming themselves. In hooks' words:

When I speak everyone stops to listen but then no one hears. They are all white and they are all here to celebrate being female. They do not want to hear that the shared reality of femaleness does not mean an equal share in powerlessness. [...] They listen to me but they don't hear. They don't have to hear. This is what it means to be among the colonizers, you do not have to listen to what the colonized have to say, especially if their ideas come from experience and not from books. They ask you if there is a book they can read that will explain what you are talking about (1997, 98).

Listeners are indeed affected, but how? The story of encounter between street musicians







and their audience becomes a visual moment that is disguised (and marketed) as a sonorous moment. In awkward interactive moments, the audience leans on the fact that the street, i.e. the musician's stage, is a visual dominion. The sound experience we get on the street is stuck in a visual experience when the audience fails to give in to hearing. It would still be a sonorized image that they are capturing, following Virilio's confrontation. It's the practice of a habit, which is quite different than nonconscious thought in Massumi's terms. Massumi warns that affect is not the same as "habit [which] has become a reflex, lost its adaptive power, its powers of variation, its force of futurity, that has ceased to be the slightest bit surprised by the world" (2015, 66). The street musician/performer may

not primarily be concerned with such a reflex when they put themselves out to face the flow of the street: they attempt to change the flow as well as accept being changed by it; alas, what they have been witnessing lately is that reflex. Streets are always going to be porous and open to surprise – think about kids! – so being on the street is always helpful for being "in tune" with the affective sphere. When the habit of sonorized images may be taking over the affective sphere, the rhythm of the tourist-body is not the real trouble. We would need to be concerned why hearing what is not intentionally captured on cameras, selfies and ears is the challenge. Engaging in situated hearing is crucial in the sense that it will open up the street and let us trace *what* is "running active in the present."





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